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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to test hypotheses drawn from the social role model about the process that people use in deciding what other people are like, focusing on the difference that other people's age, race, and sex make. A sample of non-Latino White students (N=671) ranging in age from 18 to 81 years used the Bem Sex-Role Inventory (BSRI) to rate a person in one of 12 target groups (a race-unspecified or African-American woman or man in their late 20s, late 40s or late 60s). Race-unspecified targets were almost always seen as non-Latino Whites. Old persons and women were seen as significantly more communal and less agentic in personality than younger adults and men, respectively. When students' estimates of the likelihood that the target they were rating was retired was controlled, the main effect for age of target in communal traits disappeared. This finding supports the interpretation that age stereotypes partly stem from perceivers' observations of people's social roles. (Author/JBJ)

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Social Roles Contribute to Age and Sex Stereotypes

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Abstract

671 non-Latino White students ranging in age from 18 to 81 years used the Bem Sex-Role Inventory (BSRI) to rate a person in one of 12 target groups (a race-unspecified or African-American woman or man in their late 20s, late 40s, or late 60s). Race-unspecified targets were almost always seen as non-Latino Whites. Old persons and women were seen as significantly more communal and less agentic in personality than younger adults and men, respectively. When students' estimates of the likelihood that the target they were rating was retired was controlled, the main effect for age of target in communal traits disappeared. This finding supports the interpretation that age stereotypes partly stem from perceivers' observations of people's social roles.

Social Roles Contribute to Age and Sex Stereotypes

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Our research since 1989 on age and sex stereotypes indicates that old people and women are seen as more nurturant and selfless (communal) and less self-assertive and masterful (agentic) than young and middle-aged people and men, respectively. What accounts for these personality stereotypes? The purpose of this study is to test hypotheses drawn from the social role model (Eagly & Steffen, 1984) about the process that people use in deciding what other people are like. We focus on the difference that other people's age, race, and sex make when people decide what others are like. The social role approach to studying the development and maintenance of stereotypes emphasizes the social-structural origins of stereotype content. In this model, personality stereotypes for women and men of different ages and races reflect perceivers' observations of what people actually do in daily life (Eagly & Steffen, 1984). Because many activities are determined by social roles, stereotypes about social groups should reflect the differential distribution of these groups into major social roles. Hence, beliefs that old people and women are more communal and less agentic than younger adults and men may reflect the perceptions that most old people are no longer employed for pay and that women still are more likely to be homemakers and less likely to be employees than men. In this analysis, we tested the hypotheses that perceptions of age and sex differences in communion and agency would diminish or disappear when we controlled for beliefs that the target rated was a full-time or part-time employee, was a full-time homemaker, or was retired.

Method

Sample. The sample consisted of 671 non-Latino White university students ranging in age from 18 to 81 (M=31.2 years, SD=14.9). Most (65%) were undergraduates; 24% were masters students and the rest, doctoral students; 73% were women.

Procedure. Students completed questionnaires including the Bem Sex-Role Inventory (BSRI), which asked them to rate a "mature, healthy, socially competent" individual. Each student was assigned to one of 12 target groups, each with a different target descriptor (an African American or race-unspecified man or woman in their late 20s, late 40s, or late 60s) and used the BSRI to describe the target. They also completed likelihood estimations (on scales from zero to 100%) that the particular target rated was employed for pay full time, was employed for pay part time, was a full-time homemaker, and was a retiree. Half

rated men, the other half, women; and virtually equal thirds rated young, middle-aged, and old targets, respectively. Fifty-nine percent rated race-unspecified targets, the rest, African-American ones. Manipulation checks in this non-Latino White sample showed that 94% of students assigned to rate a race-unspecified target had a non-Latino White image or person in mind, while 95% of those who rated an African-American target indeed had an African-American image or person in mind.

Two scales of personality traits, "Communal" and "Agentic," were derived from a factor analysis of the 40 BSRI masculinity and femininity subscale items (see B.F. Turner & C.B. Turner, 1991, 1994, for the items in our two scales). The factors were converted to scales (with scores ranging from 1 to 7) using the mean of each student's ratings on the traits that loaded over .40 on the two factors. Alpha coefficients for the two scales were over .90. The Communal scale includes 11 traits bespeaking active nurturance and four traits reflecting a feminine expressive style; the Agentic scale, reflecting self-assertion and mastery, includes all but one of the BSRI masculinity subscale items.

Results

First, ANOVAS on each of the two personality measures by age of target (late 20s, late 40s, late 60s), sex of target (man, woman), and race of target (non-Latino White, African American) were performed. Then, the relationship of students' perceptions of targets' role involvement in full-time employment, part-time employment, homemaking, and retirement to their perceptions of personality was controlled by entering their probability estimates of full- and part-time employment, homemaking, and retirement for the target each rated as a covariate in successive analyses of covariance on each of the two personality measures by age of target, sex of target, and race of target.

Communal. As expected, on the ANOVA main effects for age of target, $F(2, 640) = 6.86$, $p<.001$, and sex of target, $F(1, 640) = 53.37$, $p<.0001$, appeared in which old people ($M = 4.81$) and women ($M = 4.88$) were viewed as significantly more communal than young ($M = 4.57$) and middle-aged ($M = 4.61$) people and men ($M = 4.46$), respectively. No main effect for race of target appeared. A significant race-of-target by sex-of-target interaction, $F(1, 640) = 13.20$, $p<.0001$, indicated that the main effect for sex of target was much stronger for non-Latino White than African American targets. Non-Latino White women ($M = 4.99$) were seen as significantly more nurturant and selfless ($p<.001$) than all the other race-sex groups: Non-Latino White men ($M = 4.42$), African-American women ($M = 4.69$), and African-American men ($M = 4.54$). The latter three groups did not differ from each other ($p>.05$). No other interactions appeared.

Here, we ask if these beliefs about age, sex, and race differences in personality can be attributed to students' perceptions of social role involvements.

On the analyses of covariance (ANCOVAS), likelihood estimates of full-time and part-time employment were unrelated to communal scores. Estimates of homemaking, $F(1, 638) = 28.91$, $p<.001$, and retirement, $F(1, 638) = 13.77$, $p<.001$, however, were significantly related to communal scores. Homemakers and retirees were seen as more communal than people thought unlikely to hold these roles. When estimates of homemaking were controlled by treating them as covariates, the main effects for age and sex of target on communal traits were reduced, but were still significant at the $p<.05$ level or better. When estimates of retirement were treated as covariates, the main effect for age of target disappeared but that for sex of target was unaffected (see Table 1).

Table 1 about here

When estimates of involvement in all four social roles were simultaneously treated as covariates in a single ANCOVA, the main effect for age of target disappeared but that for sex of target remained (see Table 1).

Agentic. As anticipated, on the ANOVA main effects for age of target, $F(2, 640) = 46.71$, $p<.0001$, and sex of target, $F(1, 640) = 28.30$, $p<.0001$, appeared in which old people ($M = 4.42$) were seen as significantly less agentic than the middle-aged ($M = 4.80$), who in turn were seen as significantly less agentic than the young ($M = 5.00$). Men ($M = 4.86$) were viewed as more agentic than were women ($M = 4.60$). No other main effect or interactions appeared.

Can these beliefs about age and sex differences in personality be attributed to students' perceptions of social role involvements?

On the ANCOVA, likelihood estimates of part-time work were unrelated to agentic scores. Full-time employees, $F(1, 639) = 120.30$, $p<.001$, however, were seen as more agentic and retirees, $F(1, 638) = 35.93$, $p<.001$, and homemakers, $F(1, 638) = 47.29$, $p<.001$, as less agentic than people thought unlikely to hold these roles. Using ANCOVAS (see Table 1), controlling (separately) for estimates of full-time work, homemaking, and retirement reduced, but did not eliminate, the main effects for age of target. The main effects for sex of target were unaffected by controlling for estimates of retirement by means of ANCOVA; they were reduced, but not eliminated, by controlling for estimates of full-time employment and full-time homemaking.

Simultaneous control of all four social role estimates greatly reduced, but still did not eliminate, the age and sex of target main effects.

Discussion

For age stereotypes, these findings indicate some support for a social role model of stereotype derivation. Beliefs that old people are more communal in personality than younger adults do stem from the distribution of people of different ages into the four social roles we studied, taken together, and especially the retiree role. Retirees are seen as more communal in personality than the unretired. But old persons not thought to be retirees were seen as no more nurturant and selfless than were younger adults.

The link between social roles and beliefs about age differences in personality, however, is weaker for agentic than communal traits. Full-time employees indeed are seen as more agentic and full-time homemakers and retirees as less agentic than people thought unlikely to hold these roles. But observations of involvement in the roles of full-time employee, homemaker, and retiree accounted only in part for beliefs that young, middle-aged, and old adults differ in agency.

Perceptions of role involvements had, at best, only small effects on students' beliefs that women are both more nurturant and less masterful than men. Our findings thus disagree with Eagly's (e.g., Eagly & Steffen, 1984). They found that when information about social roles (homemaking and full-time employment) was equated, differences in perceptions of agentic and communal traits of women and men disappeared. Methodological differences very likely account for the differences in findings. Eagly and Steffen did not vary age of target, and provided specific information on targets' occupations and household responsibilities. Target descriptions in our study specified only psychological health, age, sex, and (for African-American targets), race. Personality imputations are less variable when specific behavioral information is provided.

Finally, the significant interaction between race of target and sex of target on communal traits was unaffected by the social role information. These non-Latino White students saw African-American women as no more communal than men; only same-race women were viewed as distinctively communal. No other race-of-target differences in personality perceptions appeared.

Notably, part-time workers were seen as neither more nor less agentic or communal than other people. Students' comments suggest that perceivers take actors' motives into consideration when imputing traits to them (also see Eagly & Steffen, 1986). Part-time workers' motives are probably more ambiguous to

perceivers than motives of incumbents of other roles. For example, part-time work may be thought to indicate nurturant concern for offspring, or lack of ambition, or a second job held by a striver, or appropriate activity for a full-time student. There probably is more consensus on the personality traits of retirees, full-time employees, and homemakers. Further research should explore how perceivers' beliefs about role incumbents' motives influence personality attributions.

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Table 1

Analyses of Covariance on Communal and Agentic Scales Controlling for Estimates of Involvement in Four Social Roles

Social Role (Covariates)	Personality Attribution Scale			
	Communal		Agentic	
	Target Sex *F* Value	Target Age *F* Value	Target Sex *F* Value	Target Age *F* Value
Full-time Work			19.75[a]	10.10
Homemaker	34.54	4.19[b]	16.14	33.94
Retiree	57.69	.25[c]	26.86	25.03
All 4 Roles	44.64	2.60[d]	9.91	10.65

Note. ANCOVA *F* values were omitted when social role involvement was unrelated to personality attributions. ANOVA *F* values for Sex of Target on Communal was 53.37, and on Agentic, 28.30; ANOVA *F* values for Age of Target on Communal was 6.86, and on Agentic, 46.71.

[a] $p < .001$ for all *F* values unless otherwise noted.

[b] $p < .016$.

[c] n.s.

[d] n.s.